

Engaging in Heart Theology as Moravians

Revd Professor Peter M. Gubi

Interpretation (or *hermeneutics*) has always been part of the Christian experience of discerning what God is saying to us as 'individuals' or as 'community', through text (scripture) and personal experience. In the study of theology, there are many methods for systematically guiding interpretation. One method of theological interpretation is that of 'Heart Theology'. This mode of theological reflection was used extensively by Augustine, and developed further by the Pietist Movement which strongly influenced the work and theology of Zinzendorf¹. Moravians often say that they don't have a Moravian Theology. However, they do have a method of establishing a theology – which is Heart Theology.

Heart Theology 'looks to the self and the interior life as the primary space in which theological awareness is generated'², in which the *whole inner person* becomes the locus of religious knowing, rather than only the rational mind. 'This inner person possesses all the senses which the outer person does, and by these senses in a way we might talk of today as 'intuition', or 'extrasensory perception', perceives the reality of Christ. The heart smells, sees, tastes, feels and hears... My heart tells me... it is thus to me'¹. This approach is akin to developing a tacit knowing, or discernment, of Christ, which can only come from a heightened sense of reflexivity, self-awareness, and openness to how the 'Other' and Christ speaks, and where one finds a sense of God in that.

So, how does one develop heart theology? As a personal, systematic approach, I find the following helpful: **Situation**: I begin the process of discernment by reflecting on the situation that has caused me to reflect. Reflection is usually caused by dissonance (things that trouble me) or resonance (things that so match my lived experience, that they cause me to take note). **Personal Process**: Self-awareness of what is triggered within me is then brought to mind. I ask myself questions like, 'what is it of my past wounds and experience that I am bringing to this situation? How is it disturbing me, or causing me to take note? How does it match with my lived experience – with my understanding of God (Christ)? **Scripture**: Reference to scripture is brought to mind. I try and recall, or look up, passages in the Bible that seem to 'speak' into the situation from a number of different angles. I ask myself, 'how do they give insight into, or challenge, my thinking on this situation'? **Tradition**: I then give consideration to the wider wisdom that has been received from Christian tradition (even that which may no longer be relevant). **Tacit knowing**: Holding these insights, I listen to a deeper place within myself, where I feel that I am most connected with the Divine in me – a place of prayerful listening and connection with Christ. **Decision**: Having taken time to allow that process to wash through me reflectively and prayerfully, I then find myself more in touch with what I believe Christ is saying to me, or wanting of me, whilst holding a tension of both 'knowing', of potentially being wrong because what I want may be getting in the way, and being open and prepared for the emergence of further revelation. 'At the point when I am most me, I find I am most him, or he is most in me, as I am in him'³. This may then lead to knowing, decision and **action**.

Developing Heart Theology does raise the thorny question of 'authority' (*exousia*) – i.e. how can what is revealed be trusted that it is from Christ? Whilst honouring the theological insights of each individual, the credibility, validity and authority of any theological insights that may arise, may be tested against the experiencing, learning and wisdom of others, i.e. within the authority of the Church community (providing their agenda is trustworthy), and against the authority of scripture and tradition – which itself is open to interpretation and dialogue. These difficulties with 'authority' can be witnessed in examples when one thinks of situations when a person is convinced that they are called by God to bring about a particular innovation for the Church, or to respond to vocation in ordained ministry, only for their idea, or sense of vocation, to not be upheld by the Church community. One is left questioning the validity of their theological insight in such circumstances, or wondering if it is the Church community that has got it wrong. Where, then, does authority lie? Where is Christ to be discerned in these situations?

In spite of these occasional (but personally and spiritually significant) difficulties, Heart Theology is a wonderful way of feeling God's presence as *real* – and of rekindling our relationship with Christ (and with ourselves) in a profound way. Whilst many Christians defer the responsibility for their faith and theology to others (dogma), Heart Theology enables us to take personal responsibility for fostering a living relationship with Christ, and of hearing His will for us in a deep and meaningful way.

References:

- ¹ Freeman, A.J. (1998). *An Ecumenical Theology of the Heart: The theology of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf*. Bethlehem, PA: The Moravian Church in America:
- ² Graham, E., Walton, H. and Ward, F. (2005). *Theological Reflection: Methods*. London: SCM Press.
- ³ Davies, O. (2013). *Theology of Transformation: Faith, Freedom, and the Christian Act*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.